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Appleby Archaeology Group    February Meeting    2005

The AGM of the Appleby Archaeology Group, which had been postponed from January, was held before the February meeting at which the county archaeologist Richard Newman described the work of the County Archaeology Service. Before taking his present post Mr Newman was Director of Lancaster University Archaeology Unit.

The County Archaeology Service covers the whole of Cumbria apart from the Lake District National Park, the area of Cumbria within the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Hadrian's Wall. The Service provides advice and information on the protection and conservation of historic sites, on all aspects of archaeology, and on the maintenance of the Historic Environment Records (HER) which were previously known as the Sites and Monuments Records. It also provides advice on the archaeological aspects of planning and development. It works closely with a number of other bodies including English Heritage, local authorities, conservation trusts and the National Parks. He outlined the responsibilities of assessing and researching sites for conservation and or regeneration.

There is a wealth of archaeology in Cumbria with sites from prehistory to the second world war but, as in the rest of the country, ninety per cent of sites are post 1800. Early sites are often identified from aerial photographs. Recently Romano-British sites had been identified and recorded in Cumbria at the rate of one a year. Some sites are at risk from nature. Mr Newman mentioned Salton Pit, a deep under sea mine sunk in 1730-31 and some Iron Age features on the Solway, which are threatened by coastal erosion. When this happens decisions have to be taken whether to protect and conserve or to record the characteristics before they disappear.

Cumbria has many earth works including a moated site near Kendal and the remains of previous industrial activity such as charcoal blast furnaces. Earthworks are often found on farmland and help and advice is given to the landowners on how they can be preserved. Stewardship schemes may be available to help farmers to look after a site. Guidance may also be sought for many of the standing features such as medieval buildings, churches, crosses and grave stones whose inscriptions can give insight into changing social attitudes to death. He emphasised that many buildings and sites forming part of our historical heritage are still in use and that this could present problems when alterations had to be made such as providing access for the disabled.

Mr Newman spoke in some detail of the archaeologist's role in planning. Planning lists come

from the districts on a weekly basis and applications that may have archaeological implications are investigated. Applications relating to large sites or to any site near a known archaeological feature are likely to be of interest and further details will be sought, and the Historic Environment Records will be searched. If there appeared to be a threat to the historic environment, the County Archaeology Service would arrange for an independent agency such as North Pennines Archaeology to survey the area and if appropriate to carry out an excavation. On average about 120 of the planning proposals received in a year affect the historic environment. Decisions are sometimes difficult. Mr Newman spoke about places, such as Maryport, an example of a planned 18th century town and a known port since Roman times, where today's needs for regeneration have to be met while minimising the impact on the historic environment. He stressed that it was important that planning decisions took into account not just a specific feature but also the surrounding landscape.

The County Archaeology Service is becoming more involved in providing information accessible to everyone and one example is the positioning of information boards at historic locations. The Historic Monument Records for Cumbria, with over twenty thousand entries, provide basic information, which is of particular use to planners, but it does not attempt to interpret a site. It is hoped that in the future an interactive website can be developed containing details about the structure and location of sites and information on how they may have been used in the past. In some cases there might be a visual reconstruction.

Mr Newman concluded by saying that we lived in an historic environment and that this heritage was something that should be described, recorded and, where possible, preserved. Sometimes the best way to preserve something was for it to remain undisturbed.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 8th of March at 7.30pm in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby when Stan Beckensall will be talking on Prehistoric Rock Art.

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